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MARYLAND BRIEFING

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CHESAPEAKE BAY

Decline in Grasses a Bad Sign

The amount of underwater grasses in the Chesapeake Bay -- considered a key indicator of the estuary's health -- fell by 25 percent in 2006, reaching its lowest level since 1989, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said yesterday.

Surveys showed that the area of "submerged aquatic vegetation," which had risen slightly in 2004 and 2005, dropped from 78,263 acres to 59,090 acres last year. Environmental officials said the likely causes include hot summer weather in recent years, which has killed off grasses that were not tolerant of warm water.

Also, June's rains washed down a glut of dirt and pollution, which clouded the water and prevented the grasses from getting sunlight.

"This is a serious hit to the [grass] and the critters that depend on it," said Mike Fritz of the EPA's Chesapeake Bay Program.

The grasses provide shelter for many bay animals, including small blue crabs, and they produce underwater oxygen for creatures to breathe. Fritz said the findings were discouraging, because they showed that previous efforts to reduce pollution had still left the bay in ill health.

-- David A. Fahrenthold

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